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**BLACK-BELLIED STORM-PETREL, *FREGETTA TROPICA*,
IN MADEIRA – FIRST RECORD FROM THE
WESTERN PALEARCTIC**

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With 2 figures

RESUMO. No dia 8 de Agosto de 2011, a cerca de 15 milhas náuticas a nordeste da Madeira, no decurso de uma viagem para observação de aves marinhas pelágicas com utilização de engodo, um grupo de ornitólogos amadores observaram e identificaram o primeiro registo confirmado do Painho-de-barriga-preta, *Fregetta tropica* (Gould, 1844) para a região Paleártica ocidental.

ABSTRACT. On the 8th of August 2011, at approximately 15 nautical miles northeast of Madeira, during a pelagic sea trip where the ‘chum & drift’ technique was being used, a group of birdwatchers observed and identified the first record of Black-bellied Storm-petrel, *Fregetta tropica* (Gould, 1844) from the Western Palearctic.

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Since 2010 the authors have been taking birdwatchers on offshore monthly trips around the island of Madeira on a fast rigid-hulled inflatable boat “Oceanodroma”. During these trips the “chum & drift” technique is used to attract pelagic seabirds for observation and facilitate photography.

On the afternoon of the 8th of August 2011, a group of five birdwatchers: Holger Sperling (Germany), Ellen de Bruin, Ricardo van Dijk (Holland), Silvio Davison (Italy) and Uku Paal (Estonia) and the authors, were on board “Oceanodroma” on a “chum & drift” trip. The weather conditions recorded were: clear day with no cloud, a gentle to moderate breeze (10 to 12 knots) and slight to moderate sea (~1.5 meter high waves), with water temperature of 21° C. The observation point was approximately 15 nautical miles northeast of Madeira and the water depth at this point is approximately 1600 m. Over a period of two and a half hours the following species were recorded flying over the chum slick: several Cory’s Shearwaters (*Calonectris diomedea borealis*) and Bulwer’s Petrels (*Bulweria bulwerii*) and 1 Great Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*); feeding on the slick: 1 Wilson’s Storm-petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) and 1 European Storm-petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*).

Field observation

At about 20:04 local time, immediately after observing the European Storm-petrel, another storm-petrel species (Hydrobatidae) appeared and the observers immediately noticed its larger size compared to the previous species of Hydrobatidae seen that afternoon. Initially, when seen from above, and considering its size, it looked like a Madeiran Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma castro*. Its flying behaviour, however, resembled the bouncing movement of a Wilson’s Storm-petrel, but with higher and longer ‘jumps’ (Fig. 1). As soon as the bird showed its ventral aspect, the observers saw the unusual colouration and recognised that this was not a common species in Europe. The bird was then photographed to assist identification.

Identification

The bird was observed at approximately 15 meters from the boat, for approximately one minute, which did not allow time to obtain top quality photographic records. From the photographs taken however, the main identification feature of this species, its central black-bellied stripe, is unmistakable. (Fig. 2).

According to FLOOD & FISHER (2011), “Neither Black-bellied Storm-petrel nor White-bellied Storm-petrel has been positively identified in the northeast Atlantic. There are three sight records of unidentified *Fregetta* in the northeast Atlantic. All three descriptions in our opinion suggest white-bellied birds. Records fall in the period mid-August to mid-December: about 500 miles north of Cape Verde mid-August 1986, off Norfolk (UK) 10th December 2007, and in the Severn estuary (UK) 25th November 2009. We include the

Norfolk sighting having read the description, although it was judged ‘not proven’ to be a *Fregetta* storm-petrel by British Birds Rarities Committee.” Thus this is the first confirmed record of a Black-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta tropica* from the Western Palearctic. With this observation Madeira now counts with seven species of Storm-petrels (from the family Hydrobatidae) recorded at sea, *i. e.* Madeiran Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma castro*, White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina*, European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*, Wilson’s Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Leach’s Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*, Swinhoe’s Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis* (ROMANO *et al.*, 2010) and now the Black-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta tropica*.



Fig. 1 - Flying behaviour of the Black-bellied Storm-Petrel off Madeira. (Photo credits: top left and right: Holger Sperling; bottom left: Ricardo van Dijk; bottom right: Silvio Davison).



Fig. 2 - The Black-bellied Storm-Petrel off Madeira, showing the distinctive dark belly stripe. Also visible are feet that project well beyond the tail, another distinctive character of this species. (Photo credit: Uku Paal).

Distribution

With an estimated world population of 500,000 birds (BROOKE, 2004), the Black-bellied Storm-petrel has a circumpolar breeding distribution on islands in the Antarctic and Subantarctic waters of the Scotia Archipelago, through the Southern Indian Ocean to New Zealand. Outside the breeding season it migrates north into the subtropical and tropical zones of the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, regularly occurring north up to the equator (del HOYO *et al.*, 1992). In the North Atlantic it was recorded from the Caribbean at 11° N (BOURNE & DIXON, 1973) and from off the coast of North Carolina, U. S. A. at 35° N (GURIS *et al.*, 2004). Although the present record is not the northernmost in the whole Atlantic Ocean, it is undoubtedly the first confirmed in the Northeast Atlantic.

Remarks

Since the main breeding season of the Atlantic population of Black-bellied Storm-petrel found mainly south of Antarctic Polar Front, is from October to April, dispersing northwards into subtropical and tropical waters from May to October (FLOOD & THOMAS, 2007), the presence of this species around Madeira at this time of the year (August) corresponds to the non-breeding season for this species. The remarkable point is that this bird has come much further north in the Northeast Atlantic than normal. According to Manuel Biscoito and Ricardo Araújo from the Natural History Museum of Funchal, in recent years several species

of fish, as well as invertebrates, occurring to the south of Madeira, have been newly recorded within this archipelago (ARAÚJO & FREITAS, 2002; 2003; FREITAS & ARAÚJO, 2006). The present record is another case of a species extending its range northwards. The link between these northerly movements and climate change in this part of the ocean is a possibility which remains to be proven. The observation effort needs to be maintained or even increased in order to confirm if this species becomes a regular presence over the next few years or if it will only be seen sporadically.

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